Spirit, Mission and Transnational Influence: Nigerian-led Pentecostalism in Eastern Europe

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Abstract
This article examines the transnational significance and impact of the Church of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations (Embassy of God), a Nigerian-led Pentecostal church based in Kyiv, Ukraine. It shows that the church’s uniqueness lies both in its huge following and in the fact that the majority of its members are white Eastern European. In this sense, it represents a “negative instance” of current trends within African-led migrant churches, where membership is predominantly African. The church’s popularity is explained in terms of its Pentecostal spirituality, which satisfies the spiritual hunger fostered by socialism in Eastern Europe and challenges the staid religiosity of older denominations such as the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its deliberate pursuit of a transnational agenda is evident in the extensive foreign engagements of its leader, Sunday Adelaja, its international media ministry, the growing network of pastors attached to its ministry and its global missionary vision.

Keywords: African Pentecostalism, African migrant churches, Ukraine, Sunday Adelaja, Transnationalism.

Introduction
This article looks at the transnational significance of “African-led” or more specifically for our purposes, “Nigerian-led” Pentecostalism in Eastern Europe.1 The article examines the presence, significance and

1. My information is that there is more than one African-led church in Ukraine and that there are some in other parts of Eastern Europe. Of these my informants concede that the one under study here happens to be the one with the highest public
Asamoah-Gyadu Spirit, Mission and Transnational Influence 75

impact of the Church of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for all Nations (hereafter: The Embassy of God) based in Kyiv, Ukraine. I draw on three main sources in this study. First, I have visited and interviewed Pastor Sunday Adelaja on two occasions. The first was in May 2004 and the second in December 2007. Previous publications, interviews with Pastor Adelaja and my field notes from the two visits serve as sources for this current study. Second, I refer to his media ministry including several books and audiovisual material that Pastor Adelaja gave me during my most recent visit. Most of his sermons are available from the church’s website: www.GodEmbassy.Org. Third, I engage in dialogue with the work of two colleagues, Afe Adogame and Catherine Wanner, who have both written about this church. In my own interpretation, I give particular attention to the theological or religious dimensions of the life of The Embassy of God.

The Church was founded and is led by the Nigerian Pentecostal pastor, Sunday Adelaja. A glossy magazine published by The Embassy of God had this to say about its founder and leader:

It is amazing what God is doing through him in the continent of Europe, especially in Ukraine and the former Soviet Union. Through this humble servant of God, God has spread the ministry of the Embassy of God and Pastor Sunday to over 35 countries of the world; where people not only know about The Embassy of God and Pastor Sunday but also follow his leadership as a mentor. The ministry of Pastor Sunday also proves to the world that cross-cultural evangelism is still possible. It is true that so many Christian missionaries and leaders have come to the conclusion that it is no longer expedient to send people to other cultures, because they hardly ever bear fruit. But as seen in the life of Pastor Sunday and so many other Nigerians that God is raising up, there is no doubt that God can still use people who are entirely dedicated to Him, even in a foreign land and culture.3

At the time of writing this article Pastor Adelaja was under investigation by the Ukrainian government for some business schemes that he introduced to his 25,000 member church and that went wrong as a result of the profile. One informant, Dr. Albert S.L. Kitcher, is senior pastor of World Transformation Church, also based in Kyiv.


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global credit crunch. That development, however, should not be allowed to take away his achievements as an African Pentecostal pastor in Eastern Europe with the largest following. The uniqueness of The Embassy of God, I will note below, lies both in the huge following and in the fact that a majority of church members are white Eastern Europeans. Pastor Ade-laja’s efforts have even attracted some very positive commendations from the government following his direct involvement in the demonstrations of the Orange Revolution.

The Embassy of God: A Paradigm Shift in Immigrant Christianity

Gerrie ter Haar has done extensive work on African migrant churches in modern Western Europe.4 The initiative of The Embassy of God is a concrete example of the motivation of African Christian migrants who believe that “God has given them a unique opportunity to spread the good news among those who have gone astray.”5 Ter Haar identifies two features that are common to the lives of the immigrant churches in question. First, that “their members are mostly immigrants,” and second, that “they are mostly black.” These two factors, according to ter Haar, are “social facts with important consequences for the religious life of the believers.”6 However, The Embassy of God presents a “negative instance” of current trends regarding African migrant churches. How does one explain the existence of a church initiated by an African in Eastern Europe, but with 99 percent of the membership indigenous European? The founder, as in the case of many of such people in Western Europe, is an African immigrant but The Embassy of God is not paradigmatic for African Diaspora churches.

Discussion regarding African migrant Christian influence in the Diaspora therefore needs to distinguish between “African churches,” like classical Pentecostal and historic mission denominations established by Africans as extensions of similar churches back in their home countries, and “African-led” or “African-initiated” immigrant churches which ter Haar identifies as “African international churches” on account of their global and transnational outlook. Against the backdrop of developments in Eastern Europe, however, we also need to distinguish between African

5. Ter Haar, Halfway to Paradise, pp. 1–2.
6. Ter Haar, Halfway to Paradise, p. 6.
churches that are predominantly African in membership, and African-led churches like The Embassy of God that are founded by Africans but are not necessarily African in membership. The “mission in reverse” interpretation thus invites fresh consideration of the causal explanations previously employed to understand what may be happening, not so much with individual African churches, but rather with African Pentecostal Christianity especially in its independent non-denominational and charismatic streams in the Diaspora. Without dismissing the social and religious support network theories often used to explain the phenomenon of African immigrant churches, the racial composition of membership in The Embassy of God suggests that African initiatives in religion in the Northern continents may be more complex than previously thought.

The Nigerian Connection

If one considers that the single largest Christian church in Western Europe at the turn of the twentieth century is Matthew Ashimolowo’s London-based Kingsway International Christian Center (KICC), then it makes the submission by Andrew F. Walls that African Christianity was going to shape religious discourse in this century most prophetic:

Christianity has been revealed as an increasingly non-western religion. Christianity is in recession in western countries, and in Europe has dwindled out of recognition within the lifetime of people of my own age. The implication is that Africa, Latin America, Asia and the Pacific seem set to be the principal theatres of Christian activity in its latest phase. What happens there will determine what the Christianity of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries will be like.7

Nigeria, the most populous sub-Saharan African country, is an important player in the Christian enterprise. Nigerian connections to the spread of Pentecostalism in Africa go back to the 1930s but for the purposes of this essay, I refer only to some significant developments since the 1970s. The rise of the modern Pentecostal movement in sub-Saharan Africa from the middle of the 1970s is traceable directly to the influence, strong personality and charismatic evangelistic zeal of the late Nigerian prosperity preacher, Archbishop Benson Idahosa. Idahosa did not only mentor African Pentecostal leaders such as Archbishop Nicholas Duncan-Williams of Ghana, but he also gave contemporary charismatic Pentecostalism in Africa its transnational significance. Among his many accolades Idahosa preferred


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to be known as “Apostle to the Nations” and through his worldwide peregrinations he gave practical expression to that understanding of his calling into ministry.

Bishop David O. Oyedepo, Revd Dr. William F. Kumuyi and Revd Dr. Enoch Adeboye lead three of the most successful mega-size Pentecostal churches in the world – the Living Faith Church Worldwide also known as Winners’ Chapel, the Deeper Christian Life Bible Church and the Redeemed Christian Church of God Worldwide. Incidentally, Pastor Sunday Adeleja came to faith through the ministry of Pastor Kumuyi. Pastor Matthew Ashimolowo’s London-based Kingsway International Christian Center attracts between 8,000 and 9,000 worshippers every Sunday making it the single largest church in Western Europe. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome has a powerful international television ministry. In addition he uses several Christian media resources – CDs, DVDs and other charismatic literature – that clearly adds to the Nigerian influence on Pentecostalism as a global religion. In the field of Pentecostal/Charismatic studies, it is impossible to obtain a good grasp of the field without reference to the works of Matthews Ojo, Afe Adogame, Asonzeh Ukah and Deji Ayegboyin.8 The late Professor Ogbu U. Kalu deserves his place in history as the leading African scholar in the field of Pentecostal studies. His recent book, Introduction to African Pentecostalism, has been hailed as the most comprehensive text in terms of geographical coverage to date.9 All this means that the Nigerian contribution to the growth and transnational significance of modern Pentecostalism would constitute an important part of the study of the discipline. Pastor Sunday Adelaja and his efforts in Eastern Europe and other countries around the world is therefore only a representative of what the spirit of influence may be doing with Nigerian Pentecostal/Charismatic mission worldwide, and this both in church life and in the academy.


The Embassy of God in Context

Sunday Adelaja, a 42–year old charismatic pastor based in Kyiv in the Ukraine is founder of the single largest church in Europe. At the turn of the twenty-first century he was described by a former president of his country, Olusegun Obasanjo, as one of the most influential Nigerians in the world.10 A Nigerian immigrant, based in former communist Europe and with the single largest Christian congregation in the whole of that continent, and who has been interviewed by CNN, featured on the BBC and described by The Wall Street Journal as “a man with a mission” is a significant figure in world Christianity. Pastor Sunday Adelaja has also featured in various issues of the Pentecostal magazine, Charisma, the latest being the February 2005 issue. His church distributes a flamboyant glossy magazine that shows him in pictorial pose with a mix of celebrities including the likes of Bishop T.D. Jakes, international evangelists Reinhard Bonnke, Kenneth Hagin Jr and T.L. Osborn, Bill Clinton, Madeline Albright, Ariel Sharon of Israel, Rudolf Guilliani former mayor of New York, Passion of Christ producer Mel Gibson and President Victor Yushenko of the Ukraine. Pastor Adelaja’s name and that of the church he leads are also associated with the popular Ukrainian Orange Revolution. President Yushenko, as Adelaja intimated at a December 2008 meeting with him, wrote a personal letter to thank him for his role in that political event.

Historically and theologically I locate The Embassy of God within the neo-Pentecostal tradition. These may be distinguished from older classical Pentecostal traditions like the Assemblies of God and various apostolic denominations. The latter often trace their historical and theological roots to the Azusa Street revival of 1906. Further, they are theologically more stable and better defined than their younger progenies who sometimes also carry the designation “charismatic.” Nigerians simply tag them “born-again” churches. These neo-Pentecostal traditions are younger and theologically more versatile than their older compatriots. They emphasize not just the conventional Pentecostal doctrines of conversion, glossolalia, healing and the parousia, but also empowerment, material success, promotion and positive possibilities in this life. Neo-Pentecostal churches tend to have a more modern outlook and are fashion and technology conscious. Their style appeals greatly to the upwardly mobile youth. They

promote international networks and appropriate modern media technologies – including the Internet – in worship and in the dissemination of the message.

All these represent attempts at inserting the church firmly into public space through what André Corten and Ruth Marshall-Fratani describe as the “dominion theology” of the new Pentecostals. Dominion theology does not question basic Christian or Pentecostal dogma, the authors explain. Rather it appears as a series of lateral interpretations which imply innovation at the level of practice and the relationship of believers to the world which surrounds them rather than deep theological revision. Beyond “speaking in tongues,” which tends to be the theological hallmark of classical Pentecostalism and the retreat from “the world” philosophy of conservative evangelicalism, the new wave of Pentecostalism, Corten and Marshall-Fratani further note, has shifted its theological emphasis to the miracles of prosperity and divine healing. The meaning of healing is broadened to include alleviation of the causes of physical, spiritual, financial or social suffering and engagement in “global spiritual warfare.” It is in association with this shift that we see the enormous growth of transnational networks, the privileging of transnational connections and experiences in the operation and symbolism of local organizations, and the embracing by converts of the representation of a transnational Pentecostal community.

Thus in the specific case of the church under study, Afe Adogame demonstrates that “through their acquisition of properties and real estate the church is gradually inserting itself into new geo-cultural contexts; [and] reconfiguring their religious and public roles in Eastern Europe.” To accomplish this some, including Adelaja, have established universities and exclusive millionaires’ and billionaires’ clubs. The Scriptures are applied in ways that encourage members to invest in financial markets, seize opportunities in education, business, politics and entertainment and wherever possible to increase their spheres of influence in the world.

**History, Logo and Name**

Nigerian-born Pastor Sunday Adelaja came to Soviet Belarusia as a newly born-again Christian in 1986 to study journalism. He was born-again in

Nigeria through the ministry of William F. Kumuyi of the Deeper Christian Life Bible Church. Some six months later, at the age of 19 years, Sunday Adelaja obtained a scholarship to study at the Belarus State University in Minsk. During this period he also led the African Christian Students’ Fellowship in the then Soviet Union and went on to found the Word of Faith Church in Belarus in 1989. He ruled out returning to Nigeria after his studies because of what he described as the “unstable nature of the situation at home.”

Pastor Sunday Adelaja speaks fluent Russian and preaches mainly in that language. He started the church because, as he claims, God gave him a specific revelation in 1993 saying: “I will use people from the former Soviet Union to gather the end-time harvest before the coming of my son...though I am a foreigner, God has given me the ability to go and minister beyond race, culture, and denominational barriers.”

The Embassy of God was founded in 1994 and now has congregations all over Eastern Europe and beyond.

Apart from the African origins of its founder there is little that is specifically African or Nigerian about The Embassy of God. I concede that the African identity of the founder is significant but this must be placed within its proper context. Thus Afe Adogame observes that the Eastern European population that characterizes the demography of The Embassy of God has turned Pastor Adelaja into a religious icon. To that end, it is something of a complete understatement to say that “more than half of the total membership are Ukrainians [and] Russians” and to describe this church as an “African church” in the Diaspora. With its 25,000 strong membership being almost entirely white Eastern European, The Embassy of God does not belong to the same category as the many African immigrant churches that have burgeoned within the African Diaspora in Western Europe and North America since the 1990s. Indeed, from its logo to the use and display of banners in worship, and the international agenda of its founder, there are three main identities that seem critical to the self-understanding of The Embassy of God. The first is the immigrant status of its founder; the second is the church’s Pentecostal/Charismatic status characterized by a strong interventionist theology; and third, the deliberate pursuit of a transnational agenda.

Catherine Wanner, who has also studied The Embassy of God, speaks about its transnational focus when she notes that unlike early evangelical

communities that either sought to retreat from the world because of its corrupting elements or strive to prove that they are in the world but not of it, The Embassy of God “aims to remake the world in its own image, radically altering, once again, evangelical sensibilities and responses to worldly, profane matters.” This transnational agenda is evident in both the name of the church and its logo. She captures succinctly the meaning of the logo as follows:

The symbol of the Embassy of God is a globe with Africa forthrightly positioned in the center. The globe is capped by a golden crown with a cross. Just below the crown is a light emanating from Ukraine, which remains otherwise unmarked. The light from Ukraine shines throughout Europe and the Middle East. Africa figures prominently, but the light and energy of the church emanate from Ukraine around the world.

The name of the church was also chosen to reflect the transnational understanding of Christian mission:

The Church is the representative of God on the earth – His “Embassy”. Therefore, we – children of God are the citizens of His Divine Kingdom and not citizens of this world! The Blessed Kingdom of God [is] a place of destruction of curses. At the head of every kingdom is a king. Our King is Jesus Christ! He is the Lord of all nations... Jesus Christ is the Savior for everyone, irrespective of his age, color or skin, nationality and social status.

The question that confronts us at this point relates to the means and strategies by which The Embassy of God attempts to present and execute its transnational image and agenda. In the study referred to earlier, Adogame serves us well in pointing to the African element in the diagnosis of misfortune, deviance and the interventionist strategies of Embassy of God. In fact, he refers to The Embassy of God as “an instance of an African church that is increasingly reshaping its religious geography in the former Soviet Union and elsewhere in the world.” In casting The Embassy of God as “African” it is obvious that what Adogame has in mind is both the leadership and its orientation towards African interpretations of disease. This is an observation well made. However, even though the emphasis on mystical causality in misfortune, negative emotions and

17. Wanner, Communities of the Converted, p. 214.
addictions connects with the Nigerian worldview those tendencies may well appeal to the Bible and the Pentecostal orientation of The Embassy of God. What The Embassy of God is challenging or responding to, as far as Ukrainian society is concerned, is the dry denominationalism of the Eastern Orthodox Church (or at least its perception as such by Pentecostals) and what Adelaja sees as the spiritual poverty of the society through which the devil is believed to have blinded the people. In an autobiographical work on both his personal life and the church, one of Pastor Adelaja’s Ukrainian pastors says this of him:

This is the chosen of God; he has been planted in Ukraine to help turn around the lives of the people, the country and the history of the Ukrainian people. He is a person of destiny through whom God is saving not only some individuals but a whole nation. A country that was so oppressed, firstly by communism and then poverty and corruption, is now starting to experience freedom.20

Neo-Pentecostal movements across the globe, driven by the worldview that the devil is at war with believers in the world and that we do not fight against “flesh and blood,” give a lot of attention to the ministries of healing and deliverance. These ministries are more popular among African neo-Pentecostals because its worldview resonates with traditional cosmological ideas. Furthermore, the harsh and unpredictable economic realities at home and unfavorable immigration conditions abroad ensure that healing and deliverance serve to answer for the shortfalls in prosperity preaching among African and Africa-led churches in the Diaspora.

Religious Discourse in Pentecostal Studies

According to Ogbu Kalu, in the study of Pentecostalism, attention must be given to “religious discourse” as against the instrumentalist emphasis on deprivation, pathology, pessimism and externality, important as these may be. The religious discourse as he explains “recasts the story with Christian idioms of hope, optimism, participation in Christ’s victory, intercultural theology, anti-structure, racial nationalism, and muscular evangelism.”21 At the root of all these, Kalu notes, are how “Pentecostals interpret and preach the Bible.”22 Consequently he calls attention to the importance of taking Pentecostal hermeneutics seriously as “a specific


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lens for reading the Bible seriously."²³ His explanation of why the religious discourse should be taken seriously in the study of Pentecostalism is worthy of note:

The religious discourse reaffirms that Pentecostalism is a pre-eminently religious movement and should be studied as such. That nature of its presence, self-understanding, what it says, does, and how it witnesses are important. People are attracted by its message and by its hermeneutics of trust, it certitudes and claim to stand on the word. Therefore, we should study its theology and practices.²⁴

Pastor Sunday Adelaja’s Christian story and the theological orientation of his church means the Holy Spirit obviously features prominently in the movement he leads giving it its Pentecostal character. My December 2007 visit to Adelaja was during the church’s Winter Fast, the second of two that are held annually. The meetings which lasted twelve days were divided into two sessions of about six hours each. Praise and worship alone took two full hours during each six-hour session. This was followed by the word, testimonies, presentations of the various ministries of the church and then prayer sessions. The prayer sessions were loud, emotional, aggressive and thoroughly Pentecostal with mass praying in tongues and singing in the Spirit. The focus was not simply on The Embassy of God but on seeking the Lord’s face to break through in world mission and evangelism, and help establish the Kingdom of God among all peoples. On the last day, the colours of nations available were prayed over using them as points of contact for God’s word to reach and touch the peoples of those countries. This is, therefore, a thoroughly Pentecostal movement that has set its sights on world mission and transformation.

Pastor Sunday Adelaja, seeks to work with a mission of having been called to transform the world by impacting cultures with the gospel of Christ. In his words, he seeks to influence his generation and hence my working title “Spirit, Mission and Influence.” He writes in his most recent work Church Shift: “In 2006, I wedged myself between the armrests of an airline seat and settled in for the long flight back to Kyiv from one of my numerous trips overseas.”²⁵ That gives an idea of the global orbit of his influence. Next he had a vision: “Without much room to manoeuvre, I just leaned my head back to pray. My prayers soon turned into meditations about where I’d been, where I was going, and the overall state of


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the church worldwide.”

God then drops into his soul his call not simply to pastor a church but to bring the whole world into the kingdom: “suddenly, an image of the globe came to my mind. I could sense the burden God has for His church to be reformed in order to be capable of gathering in the last harvest.”

“Modes of identification” in the type of transnational Pentecostalism that Adelaja represents, in the words of Corten and Marshall-Frantani, “have become transnationalised, and converts place the representation of a global movement with a historical mission to accomplish at the heart of their faith.” Thus in the attempt to give practical expression to his vision the church which Pastor Adelaja founded 14 years ago has set itself a transnational agenda. This is evident in his frequent travels, media ministry including televangelism, book publications and internet ministries, and the development of transnational networks of charismatic friends and protégés. Indeed, at the December meeting, there were pastors from Zambia, Nigeria and as far away as Canada seeking to bring their ministries under his covering.

**Pastor Sunday Adelaja: “From Nobody to Somebody”**

One neo-Pentecostal church in Ghana, the “Word Miracle Church International,” advertises itself as “the place where Jesus makes everybody somebody.” It is the summary statement of a Christianity that promotes total transformation from one’s personal moral life to a “redemptive uplift” in which the results of “being in Christ” are expected to be evident in daily living and endeavors. The stories of such neo-Pentecostal pastors as Sunday Adelaja are testimonial recollections of how God raises an individual who is usually a “nobody” steeped in a dark past and transforms him or her into a “somebody”, giving them a ministry with international influence. In keeping with that religious culture, Pastor Sunday Adelaja sees his calling, ministry and success as being down to a grand divine plan executed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that through him – a previously insignificant person – God can choose to do great things. This is the whole point of the book *Olorunwa* translated by the publishers to mean “there is God” but more appropriately, “God exists.” In this book, which brings together the story of his life and a collection of testimonies from pastors, church leaders and those who have benefitted from his ministry, Pastor Adelaja is presented as “a child of destiny.” Apparently in

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having him, Adelaja’s mother had a painful birth and her son had a difficult childhood but God brought him through this because like Jeremiah, the book notes, before he was formed in the womb “God knew Adelaja.”

In the book *Church Shift*, Pastor Adelaja summarizes his understanding of God’s calling upon his life as follows:

People are amazed to hear that there is a megachurch like ours in such a dark place as Europe. With twenty-five thousand members, the Embassy of God is one of the largest churches on the European continent and in the world. People did not think such a thing was possible, but God has done it. The church and I have been the subject of much media attention, including a front-page article in the *Wall Street Journal* and profiles in the *Washington Post*, the BBC, and much more. But people are even more surprised to hear that I, a native Nigerian, pastor this church, which is 99.9 per cent white. They wonder how a black man like me ended up in Ukraine and why I was ever accepted as a spiritual leader. He plucked me from my small village in Africa... Then he brought me by divine call to Ukraine and told me to start a church in Kyiv in 1994. Since then God has done much more than anyone could have expected. He has brought a shift in our individual lives, in our city, in our nation. These principles, I believe, are to be embraced by people everywhere – including you.

To speak of being “plucked” by God “from my small village in Africa” and being brought by “divine call to Ukraine” introduces a supernatural element into what started as a journey in search of an academic degree in Eastern Europe in 1986. As Adogame notes, Adelaja’s quest for further studies and his eventual sojourn in the former Soviet bloc “is an interesting dynamic of how migration narratives are often sacralized and weaved as occurrences and mobility anchored on divine design rather than by any mundane accident. Testimony genres of several African immigrants are rife with accounts of how they saw the mysterious ‘hand of God’ in shaping their life trajectories and migration histories.”

**Transnationalism and Mission**

In *Church Shift* Pastor Adelaja also states his transnational mission strategy by making the point that God is a God of the nations and not simply of churches and denominations: “The Great Commission is not what many of us have understood it to be. We have understood it to be evangelism – bringing people from the world into our church buildings. But the

Commission mandate is to go out and disciple nations...We are called to the world to restore his kingdom.”

Given the current size and ethnic composition of The Embassy of God, it is tempting to focus academic attention on those elements to the neglect of his own understanding of his mission as one called to the nations.

This self-definition of his mission is one that Pastor Adelaja shares with the Pentecostal tradition to which his church belongs. Those who have read Allan H. Anderson’s *Spreading Fires* and Cecil M. Robeck’s *Azusa Street Mission and Revival* cannot fail to be touched by the ardent commitment of the early Pentecostals to “disciple the nations.”

In the words of Anderson, Pentecostalism “was fundamentally a missionary movement of the Spirit from the start.” That understanding of its mandate is what makes churches like The Embassy of God part of a transnational movement. The church was established in 1994 and in 2002 Pastor Adelaja gave his church the current name “to signal the church’s new mission to establish a public role for religion and to bring the faith to ‘all nations’ through extensive missionizing.” Thus Embassy of God offers a useful example of an African church that even proposes the establishment of religious banks to empower God’s people economically in order to promote the Kingdom of God on earth. C. Peter Wagner addressed The Embassy of God on the celebration of its 12th anniversary. The address mentioned the widening orbit and influence of Adelaja:

> We live in a day when the Spirit of God is speaking to the churches about their mandate to take dominion over God’s creation and to transform the societies in which they live. It would be difficult to point to a local church and its growing apostolic network of daughter of churches that has had more influence on a nation than the Embassy of God has had on Ukraine.

In the interpretation of leading Ghanaian theologian, Kwame Bediako, the self-definition of the new Pentecostal churches in the Diaspora as “international” organizations point to some specifically Christian dimensions of the African participation in globalization that may escape secular-minded observers. For, by their own assertion they are “international churches”

35. Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, p. 211.
36. Address reproduced in Dobrovolska, *Olorunwa*, p. 120.
because God has called them into a global missionary task. Pastor Adelaja himself refers to the redemptive work of Christ on the cross as being for the salvation of nations and individuals. That is why he points out, Jesus said, “go preach the gospel to all nations and to disciple nations. God eagerly awaits the redemption of the nations.”

“We now know why God created Africa,” is how Pastor Vladimir Gargar, a leading Ukrainian pastor of The Embassy of God summarized the meaning of Pastor Adelaja in their midst: “God created Africa to open our eyes to his salvation.”

Although the African dimension in The Embassy of God is significant and has some bearing on the identity of the church, it is important to note what has been critical to the success of the Adelaja initiative is that he is offering an alternative to the overly institutionalized Orthodox religion that had been available in the Eastern European context for centuries.

“Taking New Territories”: The March for Life

In attempting to understand the transnational appeal of The Embassy of God it is important not to lose sight of the religious dimension and its global resonances. The Embassy of God, we have noted, belongs firmly to the new Pentecostal/charismatic stream of Christianity with its emphasis on the experiences of new birth, graces of the Spirit and empowerment for ministry. Like the global Pentecostal movement, it challenges what it regards as the staid, silent, and ordered forms of religion offered by such older denominations as the Eastern Orthodox Church. As forcefully argued by Wanner, all the Orthodox churches in Ukraine consider Orthodoxy an attribute of Ukrainian nationality. In other words, a Ukrainian is by definition Orthodox and therefore Christian. In the words of Wanner, “Orthodox identity is geographically defined and automatically inherited.”

In response, Pentecostals say, “Churchianity’ is not Christianity,” which is another way of putting Jesus’ words to Nicodemus “unless a man is born of water and the Spirit” he cannot enter the kingdom of God (Jn 3.5). In contrast to the routine processes of incorporation into membership associated with such historic denominations as the Orthodox Church, Pentecostals offer an experiential religion that challenges the inherited Christian identities of the older traditions as adequate for

38. Adelaja, Church Shift, p. 17.
40. Wanner, Communities of the Converted, p. 136.
the Spirit-human encounter. The elements of supernatural interpretations of the enigmas of life, interventions through healing and powerful conversions, as Adogame observes, “appeals to the spiritual sensibilities of Ukrainians” and this is significant if seen against the backdrop of “a context and people barely getting over the hangover of a Marxist-socialist Weltanschauung.”

Embassy of God is popular because it offers a religious menu that satisfies the spiritual hunger, thirst and emptiness fostered by socialism on the people of Eastern Europe. The sense of release, empowerment and fulfillment that I experience among the members during my visits to The Embassy of God are palpable. Adogame further observes, and rightly so, that these features bordering on the supernatural in religion were not totally alien to the Eastern European context but only marginalized through years of “secular thinking” that characterized the Soviet regime. In addition to his alien background, obviously worsened by his being African, is the fact that Pastor Adelaja is responding to seemingly mundane complexities of life with religious answers that makes Ukrainian society see his religion as “foreign.” It is thus not surprising that the Eastern Orthodox Church has become his bitterest critic and opponent. The Embassy of God is included in the numbers of new religious movements that the Orthodox Church classifies as “unwanted sectarians” in Ukrainian society.

Former members of a historical church with a proud past and tradition are turning their backs on a church that is part of the political establishment and embracing a new movement led by a theologically unsophisticated alien who is literally turning the world upside down. It is these transformations evident in the lives of former drug addicts, prostitutes, leaders of mafia gangs and converted politicians that has brought Adelaja to attention and given him international significance. Catherine Wanner’s view of The Embassy of God’s vision for social services is captured when she writes:

The strategy that Pastor Sunday has employed to bring nonbelievers under conviction and to yield such impressive and rapid growth trades on spiritually rooted understandings of illness and cure. The original and core membership of the church is made up of recovering addicts and their grateful family members, who see the addict’s cure and transformation as a ‘miracle,’ testimony to ‘God’s grace.’ With echoes of the debates over faith-based social service initiatives in the United States, the leadership of

43. Wanner, Communities of the Converted, p. 4.
the Embassy of God argues that religious institutions are infinitely better equipped to deal with social ills than secular government.\textsuperscript{44}

In December 2007 I discovered that each of the groups of people who had received spiritual intervention and been liberated from all kinds of social ills have been constituted into different ministries that reach out to their own. Former alcoholics, prostitutes, the homeless and the like now have ministries that reach out to those struggling with the same problems they faced when they “found God” through Adelaja’s ministry. Natasha was an alcoholic wreck when she met Adelaja. She is now one of the most senior pastors at The Embassy of God; and for those who knew her in her previous life Natasha symbolizes for them a clear case of a return from “death” to “life.” Indeed Pastor Adelaja himself considers that he broke through in ministry as a result of the conversion experiences of his initial membership. The story is best told in his own words:

People ask me where my breakthrough in ministry started... My breakthrough came when I left the pulpit and went to the streets to look for the outcasts...when I reached out to them, doors opened wide for my ministry. Someone in our church knew of a hospital where drunkards were kept, so I began to go there and beg for the doctors to give me an hour to be with the patients. I would bring along Natasha who testified to how she was delivered from alcoholism, and then I prayed for the patients. There, my ministry began. God began to honor that sacrifice with supernatural anointing. When I prayed for drunkards and addicts they would suddenly wake up from their stupor. The power of God would descend on them so strongly that they would be set free in an instant. As a result they began to come to church... In the third year of our existence, the outcasts began to look respectable.\textsuperscript{45}

It is testimonies like these that brought Pastor Adelaja and his Embassy of God to media attention. The testimonies were powerful, they brought in the numbers, and it is these numbers that have given him transnational significance as one who is charismatic and is regarded as having a credible and proven ministry within global Pentecostalism.

**Kingdom and Transnationalism**

My own first encounter with the Embassy of God was in May 2004 during their annual March for Life through the streets of Kyiv. The March was led by converted drug addicts, prostitutes, and former members of mafia

\textsuperscript{44} Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, p. 212.
\textsuperscript{45} Adelaja, *Church Shift*, pp. 97–98.
gangs who screamed through microphones down the streets that deliverance is found only in Jesus Christ. During the colorful Jesus March participants carried banners from at least thirty nations across the continents signifying the countries in which The Embassy of God had branches. At my last visit in December 2007, the Embassy of God had established well over three hundred other churches in Ukraine with another 40 or more located in other countries including the United States of America. Wanner notes that: “missionaries from the Embassy of God compete with Soviet evangelical refugees for the souls of unchurched Slavic immigrants in Philadelphia, Sacramento, New York, and elsewhere.”

According to Bishop Bilonozhko Anatoly of The Embassy of God, their church has a mission to Eastern Europe:

> We want our Christianity to transform medicine, military, politics, sports, education, even entertainment in Ukraine. The March for Life is the beginning of a reformation in the land; this March for life has demonstrated the power of God; the March is breaking down the walls of division among the churches, and in our society.

When Pastor Adelaja took the microphone to bring the curtain down on the March for Life, his vision to influence and change Ukrainian society was evident in his prayer: “Let your grace come, and let your Spirit come. Let your power come, Lord. Let this nation seek your face; let doors be open; we need your power so that people may come into your kingdom.”

Pastor Sunday Adelaja’s success symbolically reverses the nature of mission using the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. The “foolish things” in this context refers to the identities that Pastor Adelaja carries. The first is the African identity, and the second is the Pentecostal/Charismatic identity that is seen by the Orthodox religious establishment as “alien” to their culture. Thus as Adogame rightly observes, Pastor Adelaja was perceived in several quarters as a foreign-financed charlatan who brainwashes and hypnotizes congregants into parting with their money. This accounted for the critical, even hostile stance that the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and sections of the pre-Orange Revolution government took against him. This opposition, if read against the backdrop of some interpretations of neo-Pentecostalism in terms of North

American religious hegemonic tendencies, makes clear why the Ukrainian Orthodox Church is working hard to stifle the influence of The Embassy of God within society. But for Pastor Sunday Adelaja himself, he believes that he has been called by God to establish his kingdom in a land that is spiritually dry and thirsty. Most importantly, he regards the Ukraine as a springboard from which to reach out to the whole world.

I have noted that we must avoid the danger of overlooking the overarching significance of the experiential dimension of the Embassy of God by interpreting its phenomenal size in terms of the socio-economic dislocations and upheavals that have been associated with post-communist Eastern Europe. I accept with caution Adogame’s submission that the “socio-economic climate of the former Soviet Union following the collapse of the Iron Curtain provided a 'breathing ground' for The Embassy of God church and probably explains why the church has attracted a huge following from the host context.”

Even more contentious is Adogame’s submission that “in a relative sense, poverty, social pneumonia and economic uncertainty seem to assume common denominators between Africans and Ukrainians and thus provided public appeal to new Pentecostal churches such as the Embassy.”

There is no doubting the fact that coming to Christ and experiencing his Spirit has led to a certain level of “redemptive uplift” in the lives of the new Ukrainian believers, and this beginning with the transformations of personal lives. The resources formerly available for alcohol and entertainment now become available for constructive social and economic purposes often leading to changes in lifestyles evident to all. There is some merit in the socio-economic arguments employed to explain the popularity of Pentecostalism in Africa and now Eastern Europe. These arguments of social anomie and deprivation employed by Robert Mapes Anderson in Vision of the Disinherited to explain the popularity of American Pentecostalism have been challenged as insufficient explanations for the impact of a stream of Christianity that owes its origins and spread to the activity of God the Holy Spirit.

The reference to the need for God’s power so that his kingdom might descend is a theme that lies close to the understanding of Pastor Adelaja as far as the church and mission is concerned. In the words of Wanner:

It is not just the enormous size, the rapid growth, and the leadership of this church that makes it distinctive. This church represents a compelling

example of innovative dynamics and conversion practices at the dawn of the twenty-first century that have thus far met with spectacular success… When a self-taught Nigerian pastor opens a church in Ukraine that sends Ukrainian believers to the United States, Germany, India, and the United Arab Emirates, among other countries, to save the unsaved and church the unchurched, it is no longer a case of the core exerting influence on the periphery. Rather, the interconnections and cultural flow of ideas, objects and people are also significant among non-Western regions as well as from the so-called Third World to the West… The Embassy of God is a highly innovative example of a religious community going global, and yet its heart and roots are very much in Ukraine.53

Catherine Wanner’s submission on how The Embassy of God has attempted to insert itself in the global Christian mission enterprise provides a useful working understanding of what I mean by “trans-national influence.” The Spirit of Pentecost is a transnational Spirit because he was poured out on “all flesh” irrespective of race or colour, and the list of nations that witnessed and benefitted from the biblical Pentecost, as we read in Acts 2, attests to this transnational influence of the Spirit. Thus the transnational understanding that Pastor Adelaja has of his work is one that is intended to be continuous with that of the early church. This reinvention of biblical transnationalism in The Embassy of God is evident through the extensive foreign engagements of its leader, the church’s international media ministry and the growing numbers of pastors who “apply” to work under his supervision and authority.

**Transnational Networking**

The transnational influence of Pastor Adelaja and The Embassy of God stems partly from the fact that among what Wanner refers to as the Evangelical churches in the Ukraine, it is this church that illustrates most vividly “how evangelizing is integrating Ukraine and Ukrainians in the world in novel ways.”54 The “communities of the converted” as far as that expression refers to Pentecostalism with its global manifestations is a transnational movement – the world indeed is their parish. That Pentecostalism has developed into a global culture also formed the basis of the collection of essays in Karla Poewe’s edited volume, *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture*.55 It is interesting that within the period of its relative short

53. Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, pp. 211–12.
54. Wanner, *Communities of the Converted*, p. 21.
55. Karla Poewe (ed.), *Charismatic Christianity as a Global Culture* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1994).
existence Pastor Adelaja and his Embassy of God are already part of this network of Pentecostal/Charismatic leaders with some of the most powerful located in North America. Most of these leaders globetrot on invitations to export their own brands of ministry to various churches, revival meetings and evangelistic crusades as the case may be. A number of such people have written short commendations of Pastor Adelaja and his ministry in the opening pages of his book, *Church Shift*. I quote a few of the most popular personalities here to support my observation:

*Church Shift* is a study of contemporary application of the relevant kingdom principles taught by Jesus Christ and gives evidence that the real mission, purpose, and mandate of the church is not to abandon the earth but to affect and infect it with the culture and nature of heaven. I recommend this book to all and believe it will become a classic (Dr. Myles Munroe).

Pastor Sunday Adelaja is a young old man: young because of his age of less than forty years old, and old because at such a young age he knows what old men like me know and has been able to accomplish what many old men like me have not been able to accomplish (T.L. Osborn).

The Great Commission includes saving souls and planting churches, but it is much more than just that. God’s mandate to us is nothing less than taking dominion of His entire creation here on Earth. No one has put this mandate into practice more wisely and effectively than my good friend Sunday Adelaja. Of all the excellent new books on aggressively advancing the Kingdom of God, this one stands out as being the most practical (C. Peter Wagner).

It is interesting that people like C. Peter Wagner refer to Sunday Adelaja as “my friend;” it underscores the transnational charismatic community to which he and his ministry belongs. This has been captured in the many pictorial images displayed in the church’s glossy magazines, showing Adelaja not only in exalted Pentecostal/charismatic company but also in political and economic ones. To that extent, Wagner’s reference to “taking dominion over [God’s] entire creation here on earth” is illuminating.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, we note that The God Embassy is part of a new Christian movement with a transnational agenda to dominate not just religious space but empower members economically to dominate industry, sports and social systems wherever they find themselves. The involvement of local influential figures and captains of industry in The Embassy of God, for example, will undoubtedly have visible political, economic and strategic
implications for the continued visibility and growing institutionalization of such new transnational Pentecostal churches.56

References


Europe has a very different and less developed Pentecostalism than in the rest of the world. (1) Nevertheless, there are European countries like Portugal, Italy, Britain, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Russia, Bulgaria, and especially the Ukraine and Romania with significant Pentecostal populations. There is a reasonably strong charismatic or renewal movement within European established churches, and in England charismatic Anglican churches are among the largest in the country. There is still a current of restorationalism in Pentecostalism: the belief that the institutional churches of Europe have lost their vision and mandate to evangelize the world. In these 'last days', Pentecostalism believes God is pouring out his Spirit in order to restore the church to its former glory.

Spirit, Mission and Transnational Influence: Nigerian-led Pentecostalism in Eastern Europe. Article. Jun 2010. The article explores Pentecostal embodiment practices and concepts with regard to Holy Spirit baptism and demon possession. The studied material is connected to a specific and highly controversial debate in Ethiopian Pentecostalism, which revolves around the possibility of demon possession in born-again and Spirit-filled Christians. This debate runs through much of Ethiopian Pentecostal history and ultimately is concerned with whether or how Christians can be seen to host conflicting spiritual forces, in light of the strong dualism between God and evil in Pentecostal cosmology.